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--ITEM: In the late spring of 1969--it must have been late May--I was invited to give two lectures on Vietnam at Ohio University. The course was on national security, or perhaps on the war; by this time, whole courses were being taught on the war. The teacher was someone who knew my antiwar position; but I think it was because I was an authority, an expert, a government consultant and former official, from the RAND Corporation, that made it possible for him to invite me as a guest lecturer, to offer my travel from California and an honorarium. I must have been one of very few with those credentials--perhaps I was the only one--who could be expected to speak at a university critically about the war.

I remember the lecture room, a very large one, an amphitheater with a wall of seats rising in front of the lectern, filled above capacity with seniors and graduate students, some sitting in the aisles to hear me. The classes were very long, two three- to four-hour sessions on consecutive days. I don't recall having precisely that schedule before or since; it gave time for a fairly thorough discussion.

What stays with me is an odd sense, toward the end of the first day, that the students were not with me, hadn't warmed to me...in the way that apparently I had expected. I was speaking to them with a candor and pessimism about the failings of US policy that they could not have heard from anyone else of my background, anyone equally capable of speaking so knowledgeably from first-hand experience inside the government and in Vietnam. They were listening attentively, asking good questions--which indicated, as I expected and shared, a wholly critical stance toward our continued involvement--responding with laughter, more than politely, to my offhand sarcasm. They were, clearly, interested in what I was saying; yet there was a feeling of distance, reserve, not a sense that we were, as I presumed, on the same side in opposing the war.

It had been a year and a half earlier, in the fall of 1967, that I had joined with the "Bermuda Group" in calling for an end to escalation and bombing, and for negotiations with the NLF. In early 1968, after Tet, I had leaked Top Secret estimates and cables to Neil Sheehan of the New York Times to forestall LBJ from attempting once again to fulfill Westmoreland's current troop request--this time for 206,000 more men--in secret from the Congress and public, announcing only a marginal increment.

These leaks had triggered a hundred-man FBI hunt for their source; if it found me I had expected it to end my career if it didn't put me in prison. Though I hadn't paid either price--on the contrary had spent the end of the year and the beginning of 1969 working more directly for the President and his National Security Advisor than any RAND researcher had done before--I thought of

myself as totally committed to ending the war, as much so as anyone the students could meet, inside the classroom or out on the streets.

After all, no one was on the streets that spring, protesting the war. Negotiations, proposed by LBJ a year earlier after Tet, had finally begun in Paris. Both candidates in the fall election were believed to want to end our involvement, and the public voted in the one believed more likely to carry that out promptly, lacking an involvement in past escalations and a need to justify them. People still hadn't heard the details of Nixon's promised "secret plan" to end the war, but they were giving him time to adapt it--if it existed--to the concrete facts he was confronting in his new office.

There was an occupation of campus buildings that spring, at Cornell, reminiscent of the previous year, but it had to do with racial relations on the campus, not the war. The student at Berkeley, James Rector, who was killed by police gunfire at the end of the spring term was not demonstrating against the war--in fact he had not been demonstrating against anything at all, he was watching events from a rooftop--but was a spectator-victim of efforts by the University of California and Berkeley police to close down a "People's Park" so the University could go ahead with its plans to make it a parking-lot.

So it wasn't my tweed jacket and tie that was putting them off that month, nor the fact that I wasn't calling them to the barricades. Nor a lack of moral concern in my presentation; I had made clear, as I recall, my anguish for the victims of our policy. As I ate alone in my motel room that night and went over notes for the next day, I was puzzled. No one had really argued with me, yet what I recalled in their faces was a quizzical look, challenging, even incredulous. What was the problem?

Thinking hard about it, what I might have said, or not said, that had blocked their sense of a "working alliance" with me (a notion from psychoanalysis, in which I was engaged that spring) I thought of something that might explain the division between us: and a question that should bring it into view. I tried out the question at the beginning of the next day's session.

"How many people here," I asked the audience in the large classroom, "believe that if a truly free, open election could be held in South Vietnam right now, with the NLF allowed to run [the National Liberation Front, the political wing of what the US Government called the Viet Cong], the great majority of the South Vietnamese people would choose to be represented and governed by the NLF?"

Of the roughly 150 students in the auditorium, nearly every one raised their hand. That was what it had occurred to me to

expect, in my motel room the night before.

"You might be right," I said. "There's no real way to tell for sure about such matters in Vietnam. There has never been an election like that in Vietnam, and there isn't going to be one while the war is on. For one thing, our government wouldn't allow it. They're not anxious to find out if you might be right."

"As it happens, I don't think you are right. I repeat: no one is entitled to be very confident about this, and I'm not certain that you're wrong. But I do think you are wrong. At any rate, what you believe is definitely not assumed to be true inside the government, and--on the best evidence available to me, over the last four years--it's not what I believe."

"Let me spell out what I think the situation is: not because I can prove it, or because I hope to convince you in a brief time here, but on the contrary, because I think the difference in our predictions doesn't make as much difference in our attitudes toward US policy as you might feel."

My best guess, I told them, was that if we could imagine a truly free election, the NLF representatives would get 10-15% of the vote; perhaps, in some years but probably not this one, as much as 25%. The GVN [Government of Vietnam, the Saigon regime supported by the US] would likewise get about 10-15%: from Catholics, landlords, above all from people directly or indirectly dependent on the government or military payroll.

The rest of the votes, the largest number, would probably go to religious representatives: Buddhists (assuming they ran), and Sects, the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai, who were not committed to either political grouping, either the NLF or the GVN. I don't share, in other words, the almost unanimous supposition of the class--and conceivably, of the majority of young people in the antiwar movement--that most Vietnamese, if they truly had a free choice, would choose to be governed by Communists, or by the NLF--any more than they would choose to be ruled by the regime we had imposed on them. Why that might be was another question.

As I saw it, drawing on a distinction familiar among Vietnamese though not in the States, the great majority of the South Vietnamese were non-Communists; but they were not, as some of our government leaders preferred to believe, anti-Communists, in the desired American sense that they would actively participate in or support, by free choice, a violent campaign to exclude Communists from power, or to destroy them as a political force, let alone to exterminate them. Still less were they willing to see their country destroyed, under the weight of American firepower, in pursuit of such aims.

"Right now the main political aspiration of this largest grouping," I went on, "is probably for the war to end. I suspect that for some time now, most of the people of South Vietnam would prefer that the war be over--with a victory by either side--than that it continue, at anything like the present scale. That probably includes many of the people I've included in estimates of hard-core support for the Communists or the Saigon regime; privately, many of them might prefer--though they don't have a choice now--that even their adversaries won, if it would end the war.

"The only leadership now that could get true majority support, I believe, would be one that put peace as the highest priority. And the leaders of neither the NLF nor the Saigon government do that; nor do their sponsors in Hanoi or Washington. These are precisely the leadership groups that prefer the war to continue than to concede victory to the other side. Neither truly represents the desires, nor could get the free support, of the majority of the population of South Vietnam."

It was a commonplace in private discussion among government officials, expressing the thought that neither contending political grouping had the allegiance of most of the population, that "all the peasants want is to be left alone." But various Vietnamese acquaintances had pointed out to me that this was misleading, in suggesting that the attitude of the peasants toward these parties was simply apathy, or indifference. Rather it was a well-founded and increasingly intense antipathy toward both sides: what my friend Vu Van Thai, former Vietnamese Ambassador to the US, described as a "double allergy."

That was a picture fairly different, I submitted to my listeners, fairly different from that implied by their answer to my opening question. As I saw it, it made the position of the US less asymmetric to that of the DRV, the Hanoi regime; each, in this model, was pursuing a war that the majority of the public in Vietnam wanted to see ended, in support of local leaderships that did not, and would not even in peacetime, command majority support from the population.

At the same time, I thought I could understand now the reserved attitude of the students toward what they saw and heard in me. They were correct, it appeared, in perceiving a considerable difference between us in the sense of who the US was fighting in Vietnam, and hence, in the illegitimacy, the outrageousness of our behavior.

As they saw it--and here they agreed with the less neatly-dressed students who had been fighting in the streets the previous year--our adversaries the NLF and VC were the people of South Vietnam, their leaders the true, preferred representatives of the mass of the population. From that perspective, in fighting the VC

the US was fighting in classic, unalloyedly colonialist fashion against the population as a whole: in total violation of our avowed ideals and self-definition--as ardent supporters of self-determination and government by consent--as well as in clear violation of international law and the consensus of world opinion and morality.

Perhaps, I realized, they were influenced by the widely-noted estimates of Ho Chi Minh's personal popularity, such as Eisenhower's remark in his memoirs that all the estimates he had seen judged that Ho would have won majority support, at least 80%, if the elections scheduled for 1956 had been held in 1954. But I had been persuaded by later estimates within the government that this did not hold, in the Sixties, for the less-known and much less revered NLF leadership, especially after years of demonstrations of Communist ruthlessness in the South and tyranny in the North.

They may also have accepted a maxim that was widely believed across the political spectrum: that successful guerrilla warfare relied upon, and thus evidenced, widespread popular support. The inability of the US and ARVN forces to find and destroy the VC guerrillas was taken by the students as clearcut evidence that the rural population not only preferred the NLF to the GVN and desired the VC to win, but that they were committed to the NLF as the expression of their political aspirations.

I had been spending the spring of 1969 writing reports for RAND that tried to sort out what I had learned of such matters in my two years in Vietnam and much reading and reflection. I had concluded that the maxim was seriously misleading. Guerrillas were certainly benefited when they had wholehearted, nearly unanimous sympathy among the rural population, as sometimes they did, especially facing a foreign, brutal invader. I believed this would be the case if the US were to invade North Vietnam, which would make that conflict even more costly, brutal and hopeless than our fight in South Vietnam, where I did not believe these political conditions held. We would be fighting the entire, committed population of North Vietnam, which we were not doing in the South. (I felt General Westmoreland was blind to this difference; my major concern in 1967 and 1968 was to counter pressures from him and others to expand the war to North Vietnam).

But we were not winning in the South, either, and that was because that breadth and intensity of public support was not required for guerrillas to survive and operate against superior military forces. What was necessary was silence from the population about the whereabouts and movements of the guerrilla forces, a lack of active cooperation with the military intelligence apparatus of the forces chasing the guerrillas. But that silence did not require, or conclusively demonstrate, that a majority of the population willingly accepted the authority of the guerrilla leaders or the preeminent validity of their cause. It could exist

under a rather wide range of political conditions, including those that obtained in South Vietnam.

The students saw the role of our army in South Vietnam as being indistinguishable from that of an invader of a foreign country, pure aggression and foreign domination. If I had believed what they believed, I could never have volunteered to go to Vietnam in 1965. The same was true, I think, of every other American I knew in Vietnam, military and civilian. And we were not entirely mistaken; the situation was distinguishable from that.

But, by 1969, and indeed earlier, these differences no longer seemed to make a difference when it came to appropriate policy. Perhaps it should have been clear from the start that we were not going to succeed in South Vietnam--as Stanley Hoffman had said in debating me at a Harvard teach-in in 1965--and therefore should never have entered. In any case it was clear enough in 1969, and that meant that we should not continue the hopeless, bloody struggle. We should seek to end our involvement, accepting terms well short of even the most limited success earlier hoped for.

The students and I, I concluded, might have a different view of the legitimacy of our involvement in its earliest stages, based in part on a different view of the political balance in South Vietnam--in effect, I saw the politics of South Vietnam as being significantly different from the politics of North Vietnam, where they did not--and this probably was reflected in a different degree of outrage between us about our involvement, a different sense of its aggressiveness and criminality.

Yet they would be wrong to suppose that this meant a weaker commitment on my part to ending that involvement. Since at least 1967 I had felt it was not merely impolitic, it was deeply wrong to persist in a lethal process that had no serious prospects of ending with success. A continuation of this war by the US could no longer be considered Just War, whether or not that had ever been appropriate.

The students listened. They applauded at the end, again more than politely, less than boisterously. I don't recall any great change in the tone of their response from the first day. I had not really expected to shift them to my point of view, which was unfamiliar to them and which, right or wrong, reflected many months of my own experience and discussions in Vietnam. To elucidate what I saw as the difference in our assumptions was not to eliminate it, or the feelings that followed from it.

The gist of my remarks on this second day was that their own policy preference for getting out--which I shared--was compatible was a view of Vietnamese politics fairly different from theirs. If they chose to pursue the question, I was indicating, they might

shift their views significantly in the direction of the political reality I saw without altering their political stance.

As it was, they supposed a different reality. When I asserted mine--I acknowledged to myself reluctantly--they could hardly help seeing me as a government apologist, a barely-changed Cold Warrior, even though I had come to differ with current policy. Too bad; I saw myself differently; but as for circumstances in Vietnam, all I could do was to call them the way I saw them.

But as I gathered up my notes and went back to the motel, a new thought began to emerge, as I listened again to what I had heard myself saying during the lecture. The majority of the people of South Vietnam were not enthusiastic, committed supporters of the VC. Contrary to what the students believed, we were not in that sense battling, illegitimately, against majority opinion in South Vietnam. —

In that sense. But what of the other judgment I had expressed, in my effort to define Vietnamese political opinion? What was the implication of saying that the majority of South Vietnamese wanted the war to be over, no matter who won? What did that say about the legitimacy of our will to continue the war?

I pondered that question late that night. The next morning, before I flew home to California, I called my friend Mort Halperin, who was working for Henry Kissinger in the White House on Vietnam.

"Let me put a question to you, Mort," I asked him. "What would be your best guess on the proportion of Vietnamese, by now, who would rather see the war over, no matter who won?"

"I suppose about 80 or 90%," he said. Not to my surprise. —

"What do you think your boss [Kissinger] would say?"

"I've never discussed it with him. But I would guess he would say about the same."

"Those guesses sound about right," I said. "But here's a question that is new for me; it's starting to bother me a lot. If it were true that most of the South Vietnamese wanted the war to be over, whether that was at the cost of either a Communist victory or a GVN victory: How could we be justified in prolonging the war, inside their country? Why would we have the right to keep it going even one more day?"

There was a long silence. Then Mort said, "That's a very good question. I don't have an answer. Let me think about it."

As I concentrated on this question myself, on the flight home and afterwards, it began to shift my moral perceptions and feelings with something of the effect of a Zen koan. The result was not entirely logical; it came from a different perspective, different considerations. It was expressed in a new feeling of obligation and above all of urgency.

To carry on a war in someone else's country against the intense wishes of most of the inhabitants--a country in no way implicated in attacking one's own, or anyone else's--began to seem to me a wrong of the highest degree imaginable. A crime. A sin. Not, something to be terminated "as soon as it can be done gracefully, without harming other significant objectives"--which more or less expresses a view I had held, or accepted, till then--but something which must cease as soon as possible, right now, immediately.

I did not share the students' beliefs about Vietnamese support for the NLF; yet, I came to realize, what I did believe about their lack of support for the war did not suggest that our policy was less outrageous or criminal than they felt.